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AUTHOR Onoda, Lawrence
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is (a) to point out the need for more effective counseling strategies for Asian-Americans and (b) to stimulate thought and discussion regarding alternative methods for counseling Asian-Americans. Since many Asian-Americans have been sterectyped as being "well-adjusted" very little research has been conducted on their psychological needs. Also, little effort has been made to determine whether current counseling strategies are relevant to Asian-Americans. It is the contention of this paper that the traditional models of counseling ignore the cultural background of Asian-Americans. This is the primary reason why Asian-Americans do not utilize counseling services. The Cultural-Milieu counseling approach is a theoretical position that takes into consideration the psychological, sociological, environmental, and cultural factors affecting the counseling process. Finally, the paper discusses the future goals and needs of Asian-Americans in relation to mental health professionals. (Author)

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Cultural-Milieu Counseling with Asian-American Students at a University Counseling Center

Lawrence Onoda Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist
California State University, Northridge

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is (a) to point out the need for more effective counseling strategies for Asian-Americans and (b) to stimulate thought and discussion regarding alternative methods for counseling Asian-Americans. Since many Asian-Americans have been stereotyped as being "well-adjusted" very little research has been conducted on their psychological needs. Also, little effort has been made to determine whether current counseling strategies are relevant to Asian-Americans. It is the contention of this paper that the traditional models of counseling ignore the cultural background of Asian-Americans. This is the primary reason why Asian-Americans do not utilize counseling services. The Cultural-Milieu counseling approach is a theoretical position that takes into consideration the psychological, sociological, environmental, and cultural factors affecting the counseling process. Finally, the paper discusses the future goals and needs of Asian-Americans in relation to mental health professionals.

Cultural-Milieu Counseling with Asian-American Students at a University Counseling Center

The purpose of this paper is not to limit the definition of counseling with Asian Americans conclusively because a specific definition of counseling would only lead to further constraining stereotypes. However, I am proposing a serious re-examination of the traditional modalities of counseling and their relevance and effectiveness with Asian American students. I hope to stimulate thought and discussion about an alternative method of counseling for Asian Americans that will be referred to as Cultural-Milieu Counseling. This method of counseling proposes alternative ways of defining counseling and the role of the counselor or psychologist.

It has been assumed that counseling is a "helping" service, however, counseling center staff members have been basically unresponsive to the needs of Asian Americans. Of the major ethnic groups such as Blacks, Chicanos, and Native Americans least is known regarding the social, cultural and psychological needs of Asian Americans on college campuses. One reason is that Asian Americans have been stereotyped by many Anglos as being "well-adjusted," and have thus been regarded as not needing the help of counseling center professionals. It may be true that Asian Americans face different types of problems, but it is not necessarily true that Asian Americans are devoid of problems that would warrant the attention of college counselors and psychologists.

It has been found that Asian American students have a higher incidence of apprehensions, tensions, and neurotic tendencies than Anglo college students (Meredith, 1966). Sue and Sue (1974) compared the MMPI scores of Mainland Japanese and Chinese American college students with a non-Asian sample at a university psychiatric clinic and found that Asian American students had more pronounced MMPI scores, exhibited more somatic complaints, family discord,

and social introversion than non-Asians. They concluded that the incidence of psychopathology among Asian Americans has been underestimated.

If it is true that Asian Americans are experiencing frustrations similar to those of other college students, why are Asian Americans reluctant to utilize the services of counseling centers? Although Asian Americans are generally the largest minority group on many college campuses, they are least likely to utilize the services of college counseling centers.

In the survey conducted by Onoda (1975) at the University of California, Irvine, Asian American students were asked why they had not utilized the services of the college counseling center. 85% of the Asian Americans indicated that they have not used the counseling center services because they were unfamiliar with the services, 7% indicated that the programs offered were not relevant, 5% indicated that they could not relate to the staff, and 2% said they did not like to discuss their problems with strangers.

It was somewhat surprising that 85% of the Asian Americans indicated that they were unfamiliar with the counseling center services. It is my contention that these findings mean that Asian Americans do not consider the counseling center as a source of help when they are experiencing personal concerns. These findings could mean that if a greater effort was made in terms of an "outreach" program, more Asian Americans would avail themselves of the counseling center programs.

Asian Americans at the University of California were asked in a survey to rank a person in order of preference they would consult about academic and personal concerns. They indicated that for academic problems they would seek advice from the following individuals: teachers, peers, counselors, and parents. However they indicated that if they had a personal problem they would seek help from the following: peers, teachers, and parents. The counselor or

psychologist was basically not considered a source of help. It was evident that Asian Americans primarily conceptualize the role of the counselors and psychologists as dispensers of academic advice and do not perceive them as resources for help with personal conflicts. This finding indicated, in my opinion, that the traditional models of personal counseling are not relevant for Asian Americans.

Traditional Counseling Model

There are certain assumptions about personal counseling that may be related to the Asian American student's reluctancy to use the counseling center services. I believe that certain assumptions about counseling are predicated on the Anglo culture and thus violate certain cultural norms of Asian Americans. There is a tendency for college counselors and psychologists to ignore the culture of Asian Americans and try to counsel them as they would an Anglo student. It is my contention that most counselors and psychologists in counseling centers are so entrenched in their own ethnocentrism (Gestalt, Behavior Modification, Client-Centered, etc.) that they are not always effective in counseling Asian Americans. For example, many of the so called counseling models emphasize "getting in touch with your feelings" or "spilling your guts" as a beneficial treatment. However, Asians are not culturally conditioned to perform this Anglo ritual of soul vomitting before strangers. Goleman (1976) indicated that Asians have used an alternative form of psychotherapy which is called meditation. Meditation emphasizes self-introspection, self-discipline, and self-control of feelings and emotions. Self-growth through meditation is a private affair. Many counselors and psychologists vehemently state that Asians are suffering from repressed feelings that need to be purged through the techniques of Anglo counseling. I am not in conflict with the idea that Asians could benefit from more effective ways of coping with their internal

feelings, but I am in disagreement with the current approaches that are used in counseling. Although, my colleagues may not agree, I believe that Anglo counselors and psychologists suffer from an acute case of ethnocentrism. Since counselors and psychologists are supposed to be sensitive to the feelings and needs of others they should not ignore the overt and covert language of culture. Rather than parroting Anglo counseling values to Asian Americans, counselors and psychologists need to understand the cultural background of Asian Americans and use this cultural understanding as a basis for developing alternative models of counseling. Counselors and psychologists need to re-evaluate their values, not Asian Americans.

Asians are trained to internalize and meditate about their personal conflicts, and the concept of relating to a stranger your inner most personal conflicts is seen as a negative behavior. The role of counselor or psychologist does not exist within the traditional Asian culture. For example, in the Japanese educational system before World War II there was no designated role called counselor or psychologist. The role of the counselor and psychologist has its roots and definition in the Anglo culture.

It is true that helping services have existed under different role titles, but the "helping" persons were either teachers, parents, peers, or religious leaders. The majority of interpersonal counseling was conducted by "significant others" rather than the traditional counselor or psychologist. Also, these designated "helping" persons did not emphasize verbal expressions of feelings toward others, rather they taught self-discipline and self-mastery. In essence, the concept of the processes and goals of counseling were uniquely different. My purpose at this point is to state that many counselors and psychologists have traditionally accepted the process and role of their profession without questioning the values and underlying assumptions that

permeate Anglo counseling. In other words, many counselors and psychologists have failed to thoroughly adapt their counseling strategies to incorporate different cultural perspectives.

Cultural-Milieu Counseling

Cultural-Milieu counseling enhances or facilitates psychological, sociological, environmental and cultural factors affecting the minority students' life space. In Cultural-Milieu counseling there is greater emphasis on working with the cultural-environmental factors affecting the students' life space. This counseling approach may endeavor to modify, alter, enhance and facilitate a positive environment with the university environment.

Cultural-Milieu counseling goes beyond usual "environmental manipulation" such as changing student's academic programs, helping minority students find jobs or financial aid or providing students with tutorial services; Milieu counseling is an attempt to help the minority students to cultivate, explore, and communicate the uniqueness of their cultural identities. Cultural-Milieu counseling is not being proposed as a replacement for the traditional counseling models, but it is proposed as an adjunctive form of counseling.

There are certain fundamental assumptions about Cultural-Milieu counseling that will be expounded upon in the following paragraphs.

The first goal of the Cultural-Milieu counseling approach is to help the minority student to identify with the university. Asian American students as well as other minority students often feel alienated, isolated, and estranged from some of the traditional values, attitudes and beliefs of the university faculty, administrators, and staff. In other words, almost every aspect of university life reflects the beliefs and values of Anglos. Minority students find that the differing cultural values result in significant feelings of isolation and alienation from the university. Thus, ethnic minorities do not

feel that they are accepted members of university life because they are continually bombarded with demands for them to sacrifice their cultural identity.

We are territorial beings. The concept of owning territory is not new in that many anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists have pointed out the need to define a portion of land for oneself. In the Cultural-Milieu counseling approach, this is considered an essential and necessary aspect of the counseling process. Asian Americans as well as other ethnic minority students actually need a physical location which they can define as their territory. The Cross-Cultural Center which is an actual building that houses the major ethnic minority groups has been established to meet this need. The Cross-Cultural Center has office space for the different minority groups as well as space for open forum discussions. Since this building is actually located on the university, it has become an oasis where minority students can share their cultural identities.

Secondly, the purpose of the Cultural-Milieu counseling is to establish an environment of trust and acceptance where minority students can reflect, develop, define and experience their cultural backgrounds. Cultural activities which reflect the Asian heritage and identity are planned by the different Asian groups on campus. Also, "Third World" or intraethnic cultural projects are planned which facilitates a greater understanding between other minority students and the university. However, the greatest benefit is that it strengthens the minority students' self-concept by developing ethnic pride.

Thirdly, Cultural-Milieu counseling is based on a fundamental assumption which is pragmatism. In other words, a goal in Cultural-Milieu counseling is to teach "survival skills" so that Asian American students can attain their educational goals at the university. The word survival may entail academic, vocational, psychological or whatever types of programs that are needed. Since

the Cultural-Milieu counselor cannot effectively know everything or be all things to every student, he or she attempts to teach Asian Americans to more effectively utilize the university services.

Since Asian Americans have been stereotyped as high-achievers, academic survival of Asian Americans has been given little concern. However, in a survey conducted by Onoda (1975), Asian Americans were asked what types of workshops would help them more effectively "survive" university life; and there were memory and concentration, test taking, vocational, and consciousness raising. Their interests primarily centered around academic programs however, there is an increasing interest shown toward consciousness raising groups. The increasing interest in consciousness raising implies that Asian Americans are interested in personal self-growth, but it does not mean that they are becoming more interested in encounter groups.

Once having a clearer idea of the survival needs of Asian Americans, then the Cultural-Milieu counselor or psychologist can design effective programs or find someone who can deliver such programs.

Fourth, the Cultural-Milieu counseling approach enlists the use of peer counselors to help in developing programs, deliver direct services, solving problems wherever the need arises. For example, an Asian American peer counselor as well as other minority peer counselors are enlisted to help organize various cultural activities from cultural fairs, to vary pragmatic programs of information disemination about things like summer jobs, study skills, etc. Cultural-Milieu counseling assumes that minority students tend to seek out help and advice from peers for personal or academic concerns rather than professional staff. Thus minority students are more likely to identify with peer counselors who can more appropriately identify with their problems and conflicts.

Fifth, Cultural-Milieu counseling requires that the minority counseling staff re-examine their attitudes about their roles as counselors or psychologists. Counselors, and psychologists must come out of their offices and begin interacting with students within their environment (now known as the Cross-Cultural Center). Instead of being traditional counselors and psychologists they become social or Milieu counselors and psychologists. The Milieu counselor is the catalyst for establishing programs or counseling strategies that meet the needs of the Asian American students and minority groups.

In Cultural-Milieu counseling there is less emphasis on setting up appointments for counseling behind four walls and as counselors and psychologists interact with the Asian students on a more relaxed and casual level, a greater trusting atmosphere develops. Counselors and psychologists try to sensitize themselves to the ways in which different minority students try to communicate their needs and conflicts. For example, one Asian student was very much concerned with prejudice against Asian Americans in the surrounding community; he expressed his frustrations about this through posters about the discrimination against Asians in America in the past. There was never an official appointment set up to discuss his underlying psychological traumas, but the fact that he could express his feelings through a media that was more culturally acceptable than "soul vomiting" was helpful to him.

Cultural-Milieu counseling operates on the assumption that it is essential to have an Asian counselor or psychologist who can identify with the needs and cultural experiences of being Asian. It is insufficient to have a sensitive Anglo counselor or psychologist who feels that he or she can identify with the Asian experience. I am stating that an Anglo counselor or psychologist who has not been totally immersed into the culture cannot identify with the concerns, fears, joys, and frustrations that are uniquely Asian. I cannot

imagine a sizable number of Anglo counselors and psychologists even willing to spend the time to learn the social - cultural aspects of the Asian Americans identity to be a catalyst to the development of programs for Asian Americans.

Goals For the Future

I feel that Asian-American counselors and psychologists need to begin defining their own roles as professionals, rather than passively allowing Anglo administrators to define the most appropriate method of counseling Asian-American students. To a certain extent many Asian-American counselors and psychologists have been lead to believe that the only good counseling is taught in the Anglo graduate training programs. Perhaps many Asian-American counselors and psychologists have become mere parrots of the Anglo model of counseling.

Many Asian-American counselors and psychologists feel that the Anglo model is inadequate; however, these counselors and psychologists can rarely explain what counseling should be like in the Asian American's. I feel the time for criticism of traditional models of counseling is past. I feel that ethnic minority counselors and psychologists need to begin researching and defining counseling with ethnic minorities.

Also, I feel that ethnic minority counselors and psychologists need to validate their role as professionals. We can no longer tolerate the implicit or explicit innuendos about the role of the minority counselor. If the role of the minority counselor or psychologist can best be served by having a radically different approach to counseling than so be it. Minority counselors and psychologists need to stop making excuses to Anglo administrators regarding how to best serve minority students.

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